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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews problems and recommendations related to the transition of youth from school to work following special education programs in Minnesota. The results of several state-wide studies are reported. The studies include: (1) a review of the employment status of former special education students, (2) a survey of needs, (3) a study of the barriers to effective transition, and (4) a survey of parents. Results from the studies are presented in terms of answers to the following questions: (1) how do our graduates fare in the community? (nine percent of former students with moderate/severe handicaps have full-time, paid employment and another 32% have part-time employment); (2) how well do we prepare students and provide assistance to families? (professionals and parents felt that, overall, current assessment and instructional practices were only moderately helpful in planning for post-school needs); and (3) what are the barriers to effective transition planning and coordination? (participants lacked sufficient knowledge about methods of developing systematic goals and objectives for students.) Twenty recommendations are grouped into the categories of: planning for individuals, transition and families, community planning and interagency cooperation, and state-wide planning. The paper also describes efforts of Minnesota to improve transition services, including establishment of an Interagency Office of Transition Services. (Author/DB)

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Transition in Minnesota

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Abstract

This paper reviews problems and recommendations related to the transition of youth from school to work following special education programs in Minnesota. The results of several state-wide studies in Minnesota are reported. The studies include: a) a review of the employment status of former special education students, b) a survey of needs, c) a study of the barriers to effective transition, and d) a survey of parents. The paper also describes Minnesota's efforts to improve transition services. These include establishment of an Interagency Office of Transition Services. Recommendations for future improvements in transition services are reviewed.

Introduction

One of the most important questions public schools are beginning to address is "What happens to youth with disabilities after they complete special education programs?" In recent years, there has been increasing evidence indicating that the hoped-for goals of employment, community living, and social and leisure opportunities have not been achieved by many youth with disabilities following completion of school. Recent studies, for example, show that between 50% and 75% of working-age adults with disabilities are not employed (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1983). Other national and Minnesota studies reveal that insufficient coordination between schools and community service agencies is one of the most significant barriers to the development of effective services designed to meet the post-school needs of youth with disabilities (Halpern, Close, & Nelson, 1986; Minnesota Department of Education, 1986; Wehman, Kregel & Barcus, 1985).

In response to these growing concerns, Minnesota has placed a high priority on improving the transition of graduating special education students. In 1985, the Minnesota State Legislature established the Interagency Office on Transition Services. The overall mission of this office was to coordinate interagency planning that would provide handicapped students leaving Minnesota public schools with post-school options relating to employment, living arrangements, social life, and family involvements. In 1987, the Minnesota State Legislature passed amend-

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ments that required transition planning for individuals as part of the IEP process and the establishment of interagency community teams.

The following discussion is intended to increase the awareness of policy makers, professionals, parents, and the general public regarding the current status of Minnesota's efforts to assist students and families make a successful transition from school to work and community living. The material discussed is based on *Transition: A Report on Minnesota Youth with Disabilities* (Minnesota Department of Education, 1987).

The Charge

What happens to students after they leave public education? What are the responsibilities of schools and community service agencies for assisting students to make the transition from school to the community? The transition from school to the community can be extremely difficult in the absence of long-term planning regarding where students will live, work, and socialize in the community, and what skills they will need. Sometimes questions about the future are asked too late, and adequate planning fails to occur.

The charge of special education, in collaboration with other community service providers, is to provide better and earlier planning to enhance the full range of adult life opportunities for youth with disabilities. Transitional planning currently ranks as one of the top federal priorities of special education and vocational rehabilitation programs across the nation. Minnesota has undertaken several recent initiatives to improve transition services statewide. Improving transition services requires the sharing of responsibilities among education and community service providers. In the U.S., vocational rehabilitation/habilitation services are provided through state agencies and play a key role in transition.

The Need

The extent to which special education programs are successfully preparing students for adult life has been the subject of recent state-level studies in Minnesota. These studies address the following questions.

How do our graduates fare in the community?

The Minnesota Post-School, Follow-Up Study (Bruininks, Lewis, Thurlow, and Larsen, 1987) reviewed the community experiences of over 400 former special education students. The findings of this study are reported below.

1. 9% of the former students with moderate/severe handicaps have full-time, paid employment; another 32% have part-time employment.

2. 54% of the former students with mild handicaps have full-time, paid employment; another 28% have part-time employment.
3. 25% of the former students with mild handicaps and 1% of those with moderate/severe handicaps are living on their own; most persons (61%) with mild handicaps are living with parents, and most persons (59%) with moderate/severe handicaps are living in group home, residential placements.
4. A main concern reported by former students is loneliness; few have friends, most spend a lot of time watching TV and have minimal social life.
5. Parents have significant concerns about what will happen to their children when the parents can no longer care for them.

How well do we prepare students and provide assistance to families?

The findings of the *Minnesota Transition Needs Assessment Study* (Minnesota Department of Education, 1986) provide information on the status and adequacy of school programs in preparing students for transition and in providing assistance to families. The survey reported the following findings.

1. Professionals and parents felt that, overall, current school assessment and instructional practices were only moderately helpful in planning for the post-school needs of youth with disabilities.
2. Parents and professionals felt strongly that it was very important to prepare students for future adult life activities such as employment, community living, and citizenship. Generally, both groups felt that schools were doing only moderately well in these areas.
3. Parents reported that their sons/daughters were or would be only somewhat prepared for adult life.
4. 51% of the parents reported that IEP goals and objectives related to the post-school needs of their sons/daughters were not being discussed with parents.
5. 52% of the parents indicated that they were not familiar with the types of community services available for their sons/daughters following the transition from school. There was not a clear consensus as to whether the school, community service agencies, or both should be responsible for collecting and sharing this information with parents.
6. 73% of the professionals reported that the schools were not following up to assure that post-school services required by students were

actually being received. These services were considered to be important to the post-school success of graduates.

What are the barriers to effective transition planning and coordination?

Other studies conducted in Minnesota have provided additional information about barriers to effective transition planning and interagency cooperation. Problems identified as relating to the development of local interagency planning are described below.

1. The participants lacked sufficient knowledge about methods of developing systematic goals and/or objectives for meeting the transition needs of students.
2. There was a lack of commitment to a long-term interagency planning process necessary to develop effective relationships between agencies.
3. The concept of "transition" was neither clearly defined nor sufficiently understood by all key personnel in state and local agencies responsible for providing services to secondary-aged and young adult students/clients.
4. Practices of coordination and cooperation among providers of services to handicapped persons tended to be informal and needed to be improved if transition services were to be effectively achieved in Minnesota.
5. There was wide variation in program availability and in the levels of service.

Minnesota's Vocational Rehabilitation Agency, with substantial assistance from parents and advocates, surveyed parents of transition-aged recipients of vocational rehabilitation services. An unexpectedly high return rate yielded the following recommendations.

1. There should be earlier rehabilitation counsellor involvement in planning individual educational plans.
2. More parent participation is required in all aspects of planning (educational, vocational, and social services).
3. More information should be available describing the services available to parents.

The Momentum

The Minnesota Department of Education and other community agencies throughout Minnesota have initiated several major activities to improve transition services. Some of these efforts are listed below.

The Interagency Office on Transition Services completed the following activities.

1. In 1985-86, 11 regional transition awareness workshops were conducted for over 1000 participants.
2. The Minnesota Transition Training Manual providing information on community services and interagency planning was developed and distributed.
3. A state-wide needs assessment on transition services was conducted.
4. The development of a special education and vocational education policy, and procedural manual for planning vocational education options for secondary handicapped students was initiated.
5. On-site consultation and assistance to the 11 educational service units around the state was provided.

State cooperation continued to grow as evidenced by the following actions.

1. The State Transition Interagency Committee, comprised of 11 state agencies and parents, developed and signed a collaborative interagency agreement.
2. Over the next few years, ongoing state-wide planning and technical assistance will be provided to create an equitable state-wide system of community-based transition services.
3. Policies, standards, practices, and funding mechanisms essential for improving transition services will be developed.
4. Other developments include:
   a) a five-year, federally funded Supported Employment Project;
   b) transition grants awarded to local districts and parent advocacy groups;
   c) numerous related activities on training and research; and
   d) technical assistance by the University Affiliated Program on Developmental Disabilities at the University of Minnesota.
5. The Vocational Rehabilitation Agency, through a "change team" and with substantial assistance from the Interagency Office of Transition Services and parent advocates, provided transition training to all service delivery and supervisory staff.

The Future

Improving the effectiveness of efforts to prepare students and plan for their transition is essential to ensure quality futures for all youth with disabilities. Carefully guided action by special education and community service agencies is essential to assure that youth with disabilities have available to them the same opportunities for employment, postsecondary education, and community living as all other citizens. The following recommendations center around the needs that focus on planning for individuals, transition and families, community planning and interagency cooperation, and statewide planning.

Planning for Individuals:

1. Formal cooperative planning must be developed between schools, families, community service providers, and students. Planning for post-school services and life experiences should begin early in a student's educational program.

2. Schools are now required formally to develop transition goals and objectives as part of each student's individualized educational program beginning by, at least, the 9th grade, or age equivalent. The next steps include the implementation of this legislation, disseminating the information, and providing local technical assistance to improve overall program quality.

3. Continued and increased technical assistance should be provided to regional and local areas throughout the state to ensure systematic and comprehensive planning for transition. The Minnesota Department of Education is conducting approximately six training workshops for interagency teams in 1987 and 1988, with additional technical assistance efforts provided by the State Transition Interagency Committee.

4. Current instructional practices, curricula, and assessment methods must be practical and be applied to everyday living situations. Stronger connections between elementary and secondary education programs should be established to ensure that students receive appropriate educational programming throughout their school years.

5. Instructional programs should use community resources and settings to enhance student learning.

6. In all areas of planning and programming, opportunities for integration with nonhandicapped peers should be emphasized.

Transition and Families:

1. School and community agencies must take specific actions to ensure the full participation of parents in all phases of educational decision-making and planning.
2. Parents' expectations must be raised so they have a vision of successful transition planning and implementation.
3. Services must become more consumer driven, with the independent living movement in the lead.
4. Parents must be made aware of essential information on community service options, service eligibility requirements, rights-to-service, and other information for effective decision-making and planning for transition.
5. Student participation and planning for post-school options and services must be more fully addressed. Students must face the challenges of adulthood as informed consumers and have access to information resources on the appropriateness and availability of community services.

Community Planning and Interagency Cooperation:

1. Local agency agreements and cooperative actions must be taken to ensure more effective services for handicapped youth. The initiative for increasing local interagency collaboration has been established at the state level through the written interagency agreement between various state offices and community service agencies. Formalizing efforts to continue to establish local interagency agreements must continue.
2. The development of state-wide community interagency planning teams is now required. This newly legislated amendment strengthens the state and local efforts to improve communication and service planning between school and community agency planners.
3. Improved information resources on students is critically needed. Information is needed on the numbers of students leaving special education programs and the types of services they will require following high school.
4. Methods should be developed for collecting and sharing information on state-wide community service availability.

State-Wide Planning:

1. Continued efforts to strengthen Minnesota interagency cooperation are critical. Schools, community service agencies, families, employers, and the public must all take an active role in improving services for adults with disabilities.

2. The State Transition Interagency Committee (STIC) must expand its membership to include representatives from medical and health fields as well as from the business community. Through the STIC committee, efforts must continue to disseminate the state interagency agreement, amend or develop new policies which enhance agency service coordination, and provide technical assistance to service providers. Small task-forces are proposed to address interagency issues through field input and make recommendations to STIC.

3. Local and state education agencies must report, as part of their annual child count, the anticipated service needs of handicapped youth leaving schools. The importance of securing accurate information on both handicapped students and service availability was emphasized in recent amendments to US Public Law 94-142, as amended by US Public Law 99-457 (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975 & 1983).

4. Future service providers need to be trained on the most up-to-date curricula and assessment methods that emphasize life skills, community-based instruction, and community resources regarding transition. To improve the process of transition, preservice and in-service training for present and future service providers must reflect current information and strategies.

5. A state-wide effort should be developed to increase public awareness on work and living options for persons with disabilities.

In summary, concerted efforts should be undertaken to provide effective transition services. The transition from school to post-secondary education, training, employment, and community living requires a) sound and effective planning for individuals, b) support and assistance to students and families prior to the time of leaving school, c) comprehensive community planning and interagency cooperation, and d) state-wide planning that supports the development of cooperative partnerships at the local community level. The issue of reforming services requires the joint efforts of families, the legislature, schools, adult service agencies, employers, and citizens. The momentum must continue in the years ahead to improve the transition of students from public schools to an array of adult services. The continued support of parents, service

providers, and the community is required to improve the quality of life for persons with disabilities.

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